

You Better Let Somebody Love You (Before It's Too Late)

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You Better Let Somebody Love You (Before It's Too Late)

by [ambivalentangst](#)

Summary

Tony finds Spider-Man on the roof of his favorite coffee shop.

A few days after Siberia, it hurts to move—to reply to Spider-Man, even, when he tries to talk—but Tony, while irritated, assumes it's a one-off incident.

It's not.

Tony keeps leaving the too-quiet Tower for his caffeine fix, Spider-Man keeps popping up against the shop's heater vent, and as weeks turn into months, Tony finds himself with a new friend. And if Spider-Man is a little dodgy here and there, well, Tony figures everyone's entitled to their secrets.

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Or, Tony doesn't recruit Spider-Man for the Avengers' Civil War. Maybe if he had, he would've caught that something was up with the guy before things went to shit.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Tony finds Spider-Man on the roof of his favorite coffee shop.

There are a couple of things annoying about this scenario. For one, he doesn't want to talk to anyone. His face is currently busted as hell, which means moving it for things like *speaking* really fucking hurts. Then there's the fact that he's been eating on this roof for the better part of a year, so where does this dude get off stealing his digs?

Unfortunately for him, the guy glances up at him as he approaches and doesn't look like he's planning on moving, though Tony doesn't miss the way his hands clench at his sides. "Hey, man," he says, and that? That right there? Is exactly what Tony *didn't* want to have to deal with, but what is he supposed to say? Get your own roof?

Contrary to what some in his life might think, he's not a child, and he touches down lightly. "Hey," he replies rather graciously, ignoring the throbbing of his lip at the movement it requires. He glances around, looking for someplace else he could go, but nowhere is what he truly wants, which is to stay right where he is. He'll just have to deal with it, he guesses. If he's lucky, maybe Spider-Man will move.

He's been on Tony's radar, sure, but he hasn't looked too much into him. He's had his hands full as of late, and the less he does to bring Ross's attention to people who he doubts are worth bringing in, the better.

His coffee steams in his hand, and if he doesn't hurry up, it's going to get cold in the New York winter. Spider-Man's still staring, his expression unreadable behind the thin, cotton-looking mask he wears.

"So, is there, like, a reason you're here, or—" he trails off, and Tony thinks about how he can kindly say *it was mine first, pal*.

"I like seeing the city, and the drinks aren't bad," he tells him instead of voicing his irritation, and it might be the first thing he's said since Siberia—just a few days ago, though it feels like a lifetime—that comes out without sounding bitter, no matter how irked he is.

Spider-Man's just doing his part for the city. It's not his fault that Tony is a well-shaken bag of glass.

"Drinks?" Spider-Man asks, head tilting in a surprisingly expressive motion.

Tony lifts a brow, not that it's visible behind the faceplate. "We're on top of a coffee shop," he provides.

"Oh." Spider-Man shifts, and for the first time, Tony notices his back is to a vent. "Cool."

His coffee is almost definitely lukewarm by now, but Tony's curious—just a little.

"Why are you up here, then?"

Spider-Man shrugs, leaning back. "It's warm," he admits, and Tony allows himself to look, for the first time, at his suit. It's not much more than sweats, really, and dirty ones at that. The Iron Man suit adjusts to keep him comfortable, but he supposes that yeah—it probably is cold for someone making the most of things. It makes sense that he'd stop to warm up a little, and the rest of his

irritation flakes away with little fanfare.

He has more to occupy his mind with than someone taking a breather from helping their city.

“Fair enough,” Tony replies and lets the conversation die out as he lifts his faceplate and his drink.

He pretends not to hear the gasp Spider-Man makes at the patchwork of cuts and bruises coloring his face and takes a sip.

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A few weeks later, Tony expects some alone time the next time he decides to bother leaving the Tower for his caffeine fix, but like before, there’s a bundle of red and blue fabric curled up against the heater vent.

Huh.

“Spider-Man,” he greets him, faceplate already up. His bruises are mostly faded by now, and though Helen technically told him he shouldn’t be in the suit for at least a month yet, he chooses to interpret that bit of advice as being told not to *fight* in the suit. Coffee runs are barely something to sniff at, and if he’s emboldened by the fact that, by now, newspapers have stopped mentioning when he takes a suit out for a spin around the city, well, it’s not like he’s going to be the one to tell her. “How’ve you been?”

Spider-Man waves, but Tony thinks the motion’s a little weary.

Not his business, a voice in his head snaps, and Tony actually pays it mind.

Tony learned the consequence of sticking his nose where it isn’t wanted the second he made his way to Siberia, and its impression hasn’t healed nearly as much as his injuries.

As he sits, Spider-Man responds. “Oh, you know, same old. Saving the city one grand theft bicycle at a time. Got a churro for giving this lady directions the other day.” He pauses, and when he clears his throat, Tony realizes he’s embarrassed by what he just said. “What about you?” he asks, a touch too fast.

It’s not a new thing, exactly, people being nervous around him, but it usually doesn’t startle him these days. Granted, Spider-Man said all of five sentences to him the last time they met, but somehow, he struck Tony as somebody too practical to be caught up worrying about what other people think of him.

Tony shrugs. “Oh, you know—playing nice with Mr. Secretary, trying to smooth over the whole Accords fiasco. Typical day in the life.” The fact that the Avengers are kaput now is common knowledge, as are the Accords, and Tony’s too tired to bother glossing over it.

Except, like last time they met, Spider-Man’s head tips just so, a perfectly expressionless demonstration of his confusion.

Tony blinks. “You’re kidding, right?”

Spider-Man’s someone who the Accords directly impact, for Christ’s sake. He should be keeping up with them, but he merely shrugs. “I’m a busy dude. Not a lot of time for the news,” he replies, and there it is, that grounding nonchalance that’s not confidence, exactly, but a skeleton of it—a tone that lacks shame and is frank, simple. *This is just the way it is*, he says without verbalizing anything of the sort, and Tony nearly drops his coffee. It’s almost unfathomable, the idea that a

mound of legislation that tore his whole life apart is a blip on the horizon to this man on the roof.

“Yeah, alright, we’ve gotta’ fix that,” he says, and *that* seems to gather Spider-Man’s attention.

“Wait, what?” He pushes himself up on his palms, and Tony doesn’t miss the way he leans onto one side—an injury on the other, most likely. “Mr. Stark—”

“Nuh-uh, none of that,” he mutters. “Look, are you going to be here tomorrow, same time?” He has some meetings, but he can move them around. It’s not like anyone cares, especially not Pepper, who came to visit him in the med wing but Tony hasn’t seen since, though not for lack of trying on her part.

“I mean, I *can* be—”

“Great,” Tony replies, knowing FRIDAY is listening from the suit and will mark it on his agenda. “See you then,” he adds on, and then he blasts off from the roof, thinking about how he’s going to go about explaining to Spider-Man just how much of a mess he’s gotten himself right in the middle of.

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“You guys just aren’t together anymore?”

“Basically.”

“And the government lost Captain America?”

“You could say that.”

“And War Machine is paralyzed?”

“Look, do you have anything you have to ask that isn’t repeating what I just said?” he snaps. He almost feels bad, but Rhodey is a touchy subject on the best of days, nevermind when he’s taken the liberty of laying out what haunts him every time he closes his eyes as of late so that Spider-Man doesn’t get himself into any tight situations with Ross’s people.

Spider-Man at least has the decency to look bashful. “Sorry,” he mutters. “And—uh—thanks for this. I had no idea.”

“You don’t get out much?”

There’s not a lot to read on the guy’s face other than the slight widening and narrowing of his eyes, as reflected in the shuddering white of his suit’s goggles, but his body language says plenty. Spider-Man never stops moving, and he twiddles his fingers as he looks away. “Nah. Just—I’m in kind of a tight spot. Not a lot of extra money, so I don’t have a phone. Or another way to get on the internet. Makes it kind of hard to keep up with things.”

Tony, dressed head to toe in designer with the *suit* suit standing a few feet away because he has a presentation after this, feels like an asshole.

Remember what Natasha told you, something venomous hisses, and he clears his throat. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he says as smoothly as he can manage. “If there’s anything I can do, let me know when you see me.”

That prompts a short laugh from Spider-Man, and Tony notes that it’s more than a little sad. “Don’t

worry about me, Mr. Stark. I'm good at taking care of myself," he promises.

Tony supposes that's probably true, but that *name*—

His nose crinkles in distaste. "Call me Tony."

Spider-Man blinks, and for someone who Tony can't fully see, it's strangely unnerving to hold his stare. He looks away for a second, and then he leans back, favoring, as Tony noticed yesterday, one side over the other. "I actually do have another question," he says, and Tony nods.

He's tried to be impartial in his explanation, told him the Rogues'—that's what the media is calling them now, *Rogues*—side of things.

(No matter how the thought of them stings, the guy deserves to make his own choice, even if it's all Tony can do to bite back memories of a cold so fierce it aches and the sight of Steve dragging Bucky away.)

"Shoot."

"What happened to you?"

Tony would've thought he'd forgotten about that first day, but the dude *really* loves poking at sore spots, huh?

To what Tony feels is his credit, he just hums, picking a piece of lint off his jacket. "It wasn't a clean break. The fight got a little nasty here and there, and my face got a good chunk of that. Don't worry about it."

He's faking calm, but while the business at the airport is something he's had to debrief more times than he can count, Spider-Man's toeing a little close to things he doesn't want disturbed and hasn't told *anybody*—not Pepper, not Rhodey.

The moment he thought Steve Rogers was going to kill him isn't something he's willing to give up just yet, and it's time to turn the conversation away from himself.

"What about you? You get into a bad fight?"

Spider-Man seems to be taken back by that. "Oh—what, me?" he asks, and his surprise at being asked after sparks something Tony thought he was past after everything—concern, unfounded and likely unwanted.

Not his fucking business, the same something adds with a little more of a leer, but Tony can't seem to stop himself.

"Yeah, you. You're sitting weird. Something happen to your side?"

Spider-Man sits with his legs crossed in front of Tony, rocking a little. It's part of his constant activity, sure, but it also comes across as a little childish, not that Tony comments on it. It makes his reply all the more worrisome.

"Oh, that? Yeah, I got stabbed a few nights ago."

"You *what*?"

"It's healing up fine though! I put some Neosporin on it and stitched it up and everything, so it's all good, just a little touchy."

First the Accords, then financial issues, now a *stab wound*—it's the universe putting a horrible conglomeration of problems Tony *knows* he can fix in front of him and slapping his hands away to remind him that it's not his place, that he's not wanted, not by people he's known for years, and certainly not by someone he's seen all of three times.

Tony never does know when to stop when he's ahead.

"*Jesus*," he breathes. "Come back to the Tower with me, kid."

He doesn't know where the epithet comes from, except he does, because yes, as he's discovered with a quick YouTube search, Spider-Man can stop a speeding SUV with his bare hands and come off without a scratch, but his voice is too high to belong to a man, no matter what alias he's decided to give himself. Young adult, sure, he'll accept that. College-aged sounds reasonable, but he calls him Mr. Stark for Christ's sake—how old can he be?

"Mr. Stark, I couldn't—"

"I'm not just going to leave you here with an injury like that. Either you come with me, or I bring what you need to you, and it's a lot easier to redo stitches without having to worry about your fingers freezing off."

Spider-Man looks at him like a deer caught in the headlights, but slowly, carefully, he responds. "The mask stays on," he ventures.

The request isn't surprising. What with the Accords, even if he did just learn about them, and the enemies he's sure Spider-Man's made from his time—however brief—fighting crime, it's a smart thing to do, making sure nobody knows his face.

(Tony's wondered more than once if things might've turned out better for himself if he never opened his mouth at that press conference.)

"The mask stays on," Tony agrees.

Then, sounding a little miffed, "How did you know my stitches were bad?"

Yeah, the kid's coming with him.

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Spider-Man refuses to go to the med wing—"Mr. Stark, I'm okay, really."—but Tony's efforts are still better than the sloppy, almost cartoonish zig zags the thread he used makes across his side.

"Where'd you learn how to do that?" he asks, moving to poke at the fruit of Tony's labor until he swats his hand away.

"Paws off," he instructs him, smearing some stuff that's a little stronger than *Neosporin* over the area. "And I've gotten into a lot of scrapes over the years. There's not always somebody around to patch you up." *And there sure as hell isn't anymore*, he thinks but doesn't say. "Were you paying attention to the stitch I did?"

Spider-Man looks off to the side, twiddling his fingers. "I—uh—"

Tony sighs and begins to rethread his needle. "Well, watch this time," he says and makes Spider-Man try again and again until he's passable, all of his work done on a napkin, of all things.

Tony has no interest in finding his coffee date keeled over because of an infection.

“If you ever need help, you know how to get up here,” he mutters, pretending not to notice the stiffening of Spider-Man’s limbs and the alarm blaring in his head that says not to let anyone back in, especially not vigilantes he barely knows in the first place.

“Thanks, Mr. Stark,” he says before he swings out of the window, and Tony realizes with a start that he’s not sure the last time someone said they were grateful to him.

He’s already headed across the skyline before Tony can think of his response, which he mumbles in an empty living room that used to house his family. “No problem, kid.”

He’s late for his meeting because he has to change his shirt to one without bloodstains, and he ignores Pepper’s message about it.

(Spider-Man never does show up of his own volition at the tower, but Tony’s not sure what he expected.)

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It’s becoming a bit of a routine. At least once a week now, maybe twice if he’s not too busy, he grabs his coffee and shows up on the roof, where Spider-Man is inevitably waiting, and they talk.

Sometimes it’s about superhero things—the mugger Spider-Man’s caught *three times* now that just doesn’t know when to quit, Ross’s usual brand of assholery—and sometimes it’s just petty stuff.

(“Mr. Stark, you’re kidding me, you like the Yankees?”)

“Better than the Mets!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah—whatever you say. At least I don’t root for the Skankees.”

“Did you just call them the—”

“The Skankees?”

“You’re lucky New York needs you.”)

It’s nice. Rhodey’s healing, but he has his own schedule that doesn’t involve the craziness of Tony’s life.

(It’s probably better that way, Tony thinks privately, late at night. His life is the one that knocked him out of the sky, but Rhodey hates it when he blames himself.)

Pepper and Happy are busy with SI, and Vision is neck-deep in the Accords just like Tony is. That leaves Spider-Man for someone to talk about nothing with, not that Tony ever plans on telling him as much.

Tony has had enough of letting people know what they mean to him, to be frank, but things are easier with the kid. Easy enough, in fact, that Tony bothers bringing some work with him one day.

He really shouldn’t have left his lab—he has a ridiculous amount of work to get done—but the tower’s *empty*, alright, and Tony can’t stand the silence. Spider-Man, once Tony gets him talking, never shuts up. If nothing else, he’ll be good background noise.

Tony lands on their roof with little ceremony, as he normally does nowadays, and steps out of the

suit almost immediately, whipping out the equation he's been wrestling all day.

"Hey, Mr. Stark," Spider-Man greets him, propped up, as normal, against the heat vent.

"Hey," he replies, grabbing a pen from his breast pocket to start over *again*, checking his work against what he's already done as he goes. "Tell me a story or something. Who you walked home recently, maybe. I need something to think to."

Spider-Man nods. "Sure thing. Uh—okay, so it wasn't a walk home *exactly*, but—"

Just as Tony wanted, his words fade out until the simple noise is all that fills his ears. Still, he finds himself crossing things out and having to start over until the noise stops, prompting Tony to look up with a scowl.

He finds Spider-Man staring at the paper.

"Want a second pair of eyes on that?"

Tony raises a brow. He doesn't doubt that Spider-Man's smart—he's taken a sample of his web fluid and *still* can't figure out how he made it, though he's offered to show him the formula—but he hasn't had someone who can keep up with him in the lab since Bruce disappeared. Still, at this rate, he's going to start tearing his hair out before he solves this thing. It's worth a shot. "Have at it," he offers, sliding the paper and pen to him.

Spider-Man studies it for a long time, and Tony is considering suggesting he rewrite the original equation in something other than the scrawl his handwriting devolves into when he's in a rush, if not assuring him that it's alright if he can't crack it altogether.

Then, Spider-Man hums and circles a variable in his latest attempt. "You're forgetting to carry this down," the pen drifts up to an earlier part, "and you misplaced this exponent. Fix that, and it should be pretty straightforward."

Tony blinks. He has a lot of questions, but he starts with the basics, which some might call blunt and/or uncouth. "How can you read that?"

More than once, he's sent his work to the lower levels of R&D only to forget to write it nicely for them on the final copy and have to do it over, but Spider-Man just shrugs. "My handwriting sucks too. You know I read somewhere that it's because your body can't keep up with your mind, so it gets super sloppy?"

That's a relatively interesting fact, even if Tony isn't sure it's true, but he doesn't comment on it. "Solve it for me," he half suggests, half demands. He loves working with someone on his wavelength, and it's taking quite a bit of discipline to not drag Spider-Man back to his lab just to be around someone who gets what's going on in there.

Spider-Man's face is hidden beneath his mask, but from his tone, Tony gathers that he probably has some shit-eating expression on his punk face. "What, can't do your own work?" he teases.

"Humour me?"

Spider-Man trades a few more barbs but eventually does as he asks, and when Tony looks at his work, which, to be fair, is exactly as gross-looking as Tony's, he smiles.

"I think I owe you a check for that one, kid."

Spider-Man ducks his head, the fabric of his sweatsuit rumpling as he rubs a hand on the back of his neck. “Well, I don’t know about *that*—”

“How about lunch?”

Tony isn’t an idiot. He hasn’t forgotten that Spider-Man’s in a, quote, *tight spot*, and he’s heard his stomach growl so loudly it has to be painful on more than one of their little hangouts. Normally, Spider-Man refuses his efforts to loan him some cash, if not just cover a meal, but now he has something to pay him back for.

“Honestly, Mr. Stark, I’m alright. That was just me helping out a—uh—friend.”

And while warmth blooms in Tony’s stomach at the term—he has too few *friends* these days, and somehow, Spider-Man has wormed his way in with the remaining lot—he isn’t budging on this one. He crosses his arms, dons the look that makes Pepper sigh, Rhodey groan, and Steve pissed off—his patented *I’m-Tony-Stark-and-also-a-stubborn-ass-who-will-not-back-down-from-this-one* look.

In further support of Tony’s stance, Spider-Man’s stomach rumbles with all the subtlety of a herd of elephants. He sighs. “I could go for some lunch,” he admits, hanging his head and probably blushing beneath his mask—he seems like the type, anyway—and Tony’s grin widens into something altogether too pleased.

“Your pick, kid,” he allows, and off they go.

//

“All the way to Queens?”

“It’s good!”

“All the way to Queens for a good *sandwich*? ”

“You *said* I could pick!”

Tony blows out a breath. He’s not irritated, not really, but he is surprised. He’s not sure what he expected of Spider-Man, but an affinity for, as far as he can tell, relatively good sandwiches, is a quirk he wasn’t expecting. Regardless, he promised the kid lunch, so he takes his order—

“Have them *squish* it?”

“You’re being very judgy today.”

—and goes in to get it for the two of them. He would prefer to sit inside, honestly, but the two tables are occupied and, more pressingly, he’s not sure Spider-Man wants to have his name blow up in association with Iron Man, not with everything still settling down with the Accords, even if the news story would be pretty boring: two superheroes grabbing lunch at a random bodega. Delmar’s, Tony reads just before he walks inside.

To his credit, the man at the counter—Delmar himself, if Tony had to wager a guess—only looks marginally taken back by having him in his shop and recovers quickly with a smile. “What can I do for you, Mr. Stark?”

Tony tosses a hundred dollar bill on the counter. “Number five with pickles, squished—that last part’s important—and a—uh—” He squints at the menu, decides on the first thing he sees with

roast beef. “—number eight if you could. Keep the change.”

If Spider-Man likes the place enough to hang off his boot for the flight over, they probably deserve it, and Tony ignores the way the man visibly stalls for a second after he speaks, his smile freezing on his face while his eyes do a quick sweep of the room before he shakes himself out of it and nods.

“It’ll be right out,” Delmar says, and Tony goes to stand on the back wall, except—“If you don’t mind me asking, you aren’t ordering for a kid, are you?”

Tony blinks. He doesn’t know what about him looks remotely fatherly, but he supposes that whatever reason Delmar has for asking, it’s not a big deal. He shakes his head. “Can’t say I am. Media would’ve picked that one up by now, besides.”

Delmar laughs at the joke, dips his head in concession. “Yeah, I guess they would’ve. You just placed the same order as a regular of mine I haven’t seen in a while—little guy, a smart ass. Sometimes you worry, you know?”

As a matter of fact, as someone who worries about everything, even things he doesn’t *want* to be worrying about, *all the time*, he does know.

An employee comes up and hands Delmar a sack he holds out for Tony to take. Tony does as much with a smile, a softer thing than the public normally sees. “I get it. Thanks for keeping an eye out—makes our job easier.”

“Thanks for stopping in,” Delmar says, and then Tony’s out the door with a wave.

He doesn’t know about the sandwich quality yet, but at the very least, Tony can admit that Spider-Man picked a place with good staff.

He walks outside the bodega, squints up at the roof. “This better be the best sandwich I’ve ever had,” he shouts, and Spider-Man peeks his head over the edge and hoists Tony up with a surprisingly smooth maneuver of his webbing. The Iron Man suit is open and waiting a few feet away, parked somewhere slightly less conspicuous than a street corner.

“Delmar’s is *amazing*,” Spider-Man insists, and when Tony hands him his sandwich, he tears into it like a man receiving his last meal. Tony’s maybe a quarter of the way through his when the kid finishes, and though Tony’s gone out of his way for this, he knows that Spider-Man’s in a tight spot and, more importantly, remembers how *fast* Steve’s metabolism tore through anything he ate. He doesn’t know how similar Spider-Man is to a super soldier, but he can’t just sit there and eat in good conscience when he’s still hungry.

He swallows his bite, and then he holds the sandwich out. “Finish it off for me.”

It’s not a request.

Spider-Man’s eyes widen in surprise. “Whoa—*what*? Do you not like it? Because, I hate to tell you, Mr. Stark, but I think your tastebuds might be broken or someth—”

Tony shakes his head. “I’m not actually that hungry. *Eat it.*”

It takes a second, but eventually, Spider-Man reaches out, his gloved fingers hovering over the bread for a long moment, but slowly, cautiously he takes it, brings it to his lips with a sniff. Then, he devours it just as quickly as he did the first, and Tony is grateful he thought to offer.

“What neighborhood are you from?” he asks after giving Spider-Man a few seconds to eat, unable to help himself.

He freezes, looking up with roast beef trailing from his lips. “I—I don’t live here. I just—uh—know the place from a frien—”

Tony holds his hands up as if in surrender. “Hey, I’m not going to pry. The guy at the register knew your order, is all. Thought you might have some connections here.”

Tony *knows* he has some connections, from that reaction, but he doesn’t want to spook him. He can fake dumb for a little, even if Rhodey could see him, he’d laugh in his face at the idea of Tony pretending to be less smart than he is for *anyone*.

Spider-Man’s quiet for a beat, and then he takes another bite of his sandwich and draws his knees a little closer to himself, making him look smaller than usual.

(Not for the first time, something in Tony’s chest twinges with sympathy for a kid cleaning up messes bigger than himself.)

“Forest Hills,” he admits, voice softened to where it’s nearly inaudible in the clamor of the city. “I moved to Manhattan a little while back after a bad run-in. Wanted to put some—uh—distance between me and what happened, you know?”

Tony can’t see his face—and that used to unsettle him, not being able to read Spider-Man like he can most people—but there’s something that settles on his shoulders just then, something *heavy*, something cruel, something someone Spider-Man’s age shouldn’t have seen.

Tony didn’t get a burden of that caliber until much, much later in his life, and fuck, that’s just not fair that Spider-Man got his ass handed to him already.

Tony’s never been great with mushy-gushy stuff, but besides the fact that they’re not done with lunch, meaning he’s obligated to stick around for a little longer no matter how things go next, he can’t just let the kid sit with that without offering some help.

“Want to talk about it?”

The kid shifts, stares into where he’s bitten his sandwich like it’ll give him some kind of answer. “Nothing to talk about,” he clips, another obvious lie. “Mugging gone wrong. Happens, you know? I was there, but I couldn’t save him.”

A pause.

“Well, I’m sorry,” Tony offers. “Failure is a lot, sometimes.”

All the time, but that’s Tony thinking of the tarmac of an airport, a city levitating into the sky, of Charles Spencer and the computer engineering degree he held before the Avengers killed him. This is just Spider-Man, just lunch between friends—not even heroes, *friends*—on the roof of a bodega.

Spider-Man’s response is a croak, hoarse but resigned: “Yeah. It is.”

Then, they’re just sitting there, letting the wind and silence whisk over their wounds. Sitting there, anyway, until Tony catches sight of a woman muscling her way through a crowd the way any New Yorker learns to, making her way toward the bodega.

He doesn’t think anything of her, other than noting a shift in the flow of foot traffic. She looks a

little thin, sure, her glasses almost too big for her face and her hair long but a touch wild as it flows down her back.

At his side, Spider-Man is stiff as a fucking steel beam, and he's looking at her like he'll die if he doesn't stop.

"Kid?" Tony ventures.

No response.

"Hey, kid, what's up? You know her or something?"

That, at least, gives him a jolt, and Spider-Man shakes his head too fast. "No—*no*," he rushes, and Tony wonders if the words hurt, dropping between them like they're carved from ice. "I don't—I just—"

He still won't stop staring, and Tony also wonders if Spider-Man is ever scared to be holding himself up without any truths to stand on.

He decides to let it be. He's learned a lesson about pushing, and Spider-Man is a friend, nothing more, nothing less. If it were someone else—someone on his team—the deception, as transparent as it is, would sting, but with the kid, there's a note of desperation to it that just makes Tony hope he's okay.

"You don't have to say," he offers, and when the woman disappears into Delmar's, Spider-Man turns his head away, swallows.

"We should head back," he rasps after a second of clenching his eyes shut, of breathing deep and nearly shaking with it, and Tony doesn't comment on the plea belying the suggestion.

//

When Tony is going to bed that night, he realizes the woman Spider-Man couldn't look away from had what looked like a pack of papers clutched to her chest.

As he rolls over and tries to get comfortable in his sheets that are too cold without Pepper, in his penthouse that's hollow without his team, he tiredly speculates about what she might've been doing with them.

//

Ross keeps calling. Against his better judgment, Tony keeps answering, and when things are over, he flies to the coffee shop and bitches about it to Spider-Man, who usually has some kind of crack that makes the hours of negotiations a little bit worth it.

And if Tony notices Spider-Man's shoulders hunching around certain topics, if his chatter is suspiciously loud, if the offer of more lunches in exchange for work doesn't bring them anywhere close to Queens again, he doesn't say anything.

Everyone's entitled to their secrets.

He has Siberia, what *really* happened after he visited the Raft, and the kid has a burden Tony suspects Atlas wouldn't envy.

It's better not to ask, sometimes, and their relationship continues in the same way it always has,

save for some extra meals and the pamphlet Tony slips the kid at one of them, a PTSD-for-dummies type thing. He doubts the guy who doesn't have internet access has the money for therapy, but some of the pointers in it aren't a bad start.

Besides, a few days later, they're on the roof of their coffee shop—

(When did it become *their* coffee shop?)

—and Spidey offers him a handful of crumpled ones.

"For the trouble," he says as an explanation and folds his hands behind his back when Tony protests. "I've got a lot going on, Mr. Stark," he hums, and Tony doesn't miss the sadness he tries to hide seeping into the admission. "It'd be less—uh—bearable without you. Let me cover a latte or something, okay?"

Not for the first time, Tony finds himself unexpectedly, tenderly grateful that the kid crashed his favorite hang out.

"You're nicer than your city," he replies but stops trying to return the money. "What do you do for work, anyway?"

Spider-Man does a flip from his place walking the edge of the roof and lands almost exactly where he pushed off. To what he feels is his credit, Tony's heart doesn't jump into his throat when he does that, these days. "Odd jobs, mostly." A hop forward, then back again. "Tutoring, quick tech fixes. Next to anything someone will pay a one-time employee to do."

Not exactly steady income, but Tony didn't expect anything less.

"Makes sense, but if you ever get tired of bouncing around, SI would have a job for you. I know the boss—I'm pretty sure I could put in a good word."

Spider-Man laughs, but he doesn't accept.

Tony tries not to worry about it.

(But it's getting hard to remember that interfering hasn't worked out for him, as of late, when Spider-Man is so different than the team he thought he had.)

//

Tony's mulled over selling the tower, here and there, considering there's no reason to keep two bases of operations for the Avengers when they hardly exist anymore, but—

("How did you know my stitches were bad?")

Well, it's not like he doesn't have the money to maintain it.

Tony excuses the change of heart, and life goes on.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony talks with Rhodey at least once a week, whether on a call or over a meal or video chatting as he tinkers with something in his lab. He's been hanging out with Spider-Man for a month or two by the time Rhodey notices something is up, but the question, when it comes, is off the mark.

"Have you been talking with Pepper again?"

Tony blinks, and his mouth snaps shut halfway through explaining why he should be paying his private PR team more. "What?" he asks, eyeing Rhodey's image in the screen of the tablet he's using.

Rhodey rolls his eyes, taking a bite of some oatmeal that's probably delicious because Rhodey is a miracle worker in and out of the kitchen. "You're suspiciously upbeat today."

"*Suspiciously upbeat?* What is this, an interrogation? I'm perfectly normal."

"You're adding fuel to my fire, here."

Tony scoffs, but he makes a point of not looking away. Rhodey will really think he's right if he does something that obvious. "I have *not* been talking to Pepper," he insists, shaking his head and letting out a tired sigh. "I haven't done anything with that clusterfuck, actually."

Rhodey's eyes narrow, and he jabs his spoon threateningly at the camera. "Tony—"

"I know, okay? I've just had a lot going on. I'm working on it."

He is definitely *not* working on it—he has no desire to see another person who currently hates him, after all—but maybe Rhodey won't call him out on it.

A beat.

Rhodey doesn't, in fact, say anything, but the look he levels Tony with is almost worse, curse his decades of practice. "Whatever you say," he says, the words uncomfortably crisp before softening as he continues, "but I'm glad you're feeling better. I worry about you."

Tony rubs a hand over his mouth, shaking his head. "Don't be. I've got it under control. Everything's going to work out in the—uh—the long run, you know?"

He smiles, and Rhodey smiles back, even if he's lifting his brows in disbelief.

"Take care of yourself. If you aren't already, seriously, try talking to Pepper. She misses you. And tell whoever it is that I say hi."

"There's *not*—"

Rhodey ends the call, and even exposed, Tony can't stop his smile from morphing into a grin.

//

"You know my friend Rhodey, right?"

Spider-Man sighs, curling into his vent. “I can’t believe you call War Machine that.”

“I’ve known him for thirty years, kid; that’s the *least* embarrassing name I have for him. Anyway, he says hi.”

Spider-Man nearly drops his hot chocolate, which is just about the only thing he likes from their coffee shop. It’s a little embarrassing, but Tony’s working on it.

“Colonel Rhodes knows I *exist*? ”

“Don’t get a big head about it. He knows that the *idea* of you exists, and *hey*—why are you more impressed by that than when we first started talking?”

Spider-Man turns his head and looks at him like he’s insane for even asking. “Come on, Mr. Stark. He’s War Machine. You’re cool and all, but full bird colonel, rocket scientist, superhero is objectively way cooler than genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist. You’re not even that much of a playboy anymore, now that you’re with Ms. Potts.”

Tony shoves his side. “I told you that *once*, and you’re using it against me? *Cold*. ” He breathes in, out. “And Pepper and I aren’t together right now, so.”

Tony watches Spider-Man stiffen. “Oh,” he breathes in sympathy. “I didn’t realize. Sorry, then. Didn’t mean to bring up a touchy subject.”

God, who fucking raised the kid? He’s a little shit half the time, but when he’s not, he’s so earnest it makes Tony’s chest ache where the arc reactor used to sit.

(Was he ever like that? Was he ever capable of showing compassion so easily, or has he always been like this, mangled and dilapidated and just—*exhausted*, all the time?)

If the world so much as dares to *look* at that quirk of his, to try and pry it out of him like it does with the soft parts of so many other people, Tony will burn it down.

He clears his throat, runs his hands down his face with just enough pressure to hurt. “Nah, it’s okay. We’ve kept it pretty private because, well—shit, kid, you don’t want to hear about my relationship issues. It’s no fun to hear about what a mess a hero actually is.”

But Spider-Man fixes him with his mask’s huge, pupil-less stare and doesn’t let him hide: “You don’t have to be perfect, Mr. Stark.”

Fuck. Rhodey tells him that, sometimes. Pepper used to, too, but coming from the kid in that high, honest voice?

It’s painfully clear that he’s not joking, and while Tony’s blocked out most memories of his heart surgeries, he feels like this is what it might’ve been like, being ripped open and having someone stare at the core of him.

Instead of running, as is his instinctual reaction to vulnerability, Tony laughs, ignoring how papery the sound is and willing Spider-Man to do the same. “Tell that to everybody else, kid.” Tony drops his head, and his breath fogs in the air before he continues, lower. “She wanted me to step further back from Iron Man, the Avengers, all of it, and I couldn’t. We’ve been over it before.” Tony swallows. “But seriously, don’t bother yourself thinking about it. It’s my problem, and I’ll fix it, eventually.”

(Hopefully.)

Spider-Man nods. “I’m sorry,” he says again, and Tony doesn’t have the energy to tell him he doesn’t have anything to apologize for.

“It’s alright,” he replies instead and takes a sip of his coffee. “Thanks for listening.”

“Anytime,” Spider-Man swears in return, “but Mr. Stark?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“I’m not so great with romance, but you have to start somewhere, don’t you?”

//

Two weeks later, Tony texts Pepper.

Tony: Want to grab dinner sometime?

He gets a response ten minutes later, much faster than expected.

(Much faster than he deserves, after ignoring her for months.)

Pepper: Took you long enough.

Tony smiles.

//

It’s not fancy, when it happens. Tony suggests something nicer—their favorite Italian place, maybe, or that one steakhouse they kept meaning to get to while they were still together.

Instead, Pepper says she wants breakfast food, and they end up jammed in a corner booth of a rundown diner, having slipped the staff a *generous* tip to encourage discretion and waiting for the plates of pancakes they both ordered to arrive.

“If you were any other ex-boyfriend, I’d appreciate the distance,” Pepper says, and Tony grimaces.

“But—”

“But you’re *not*, and I’ve been a little anxious to see you since the Avengers imploded. So, if it’s not too much trouble, could you explain *why exactly* you’ve been avoiding me this long?”

Tony blames his current project and that it’s had him awake for twenty-two hours and counting on how stupidly candid his answer is.

“It seemed better to keep you at arm’s length than risk having another friend go ahead and fuck off.”

(He *knows* it’s partly his fault, knows he could’ve done things differently, but it still hurts.)

Pepper’s mouth twists, and the blue of her eyes reminds him of a glacier, foreboding in the way that things bigger than oneself inherently are. “We’re better than that,” she hisses, after a long, weighted second. “We’ve been through too much. I’m never going to abandon you, even though we’re broken up, or if we were fighting—or—or anything else. You know that, don’t you?”

Her voice is thick with disbelief, as if she can’t even *fathom* what he suggested, and it warms him all the way down to his stomach, though outwardly he shrugs, offers a crooked smile, tells her,

“Mostly.”

“Tony—”

“It’s nothing you did, Pepp. I just—I thought the rest of them felt that way, too, but I guess not. And I’m sorry for blowing you off. I shouldn’t have, and it was immature, not to mention not the most thought-out thing I’ve ever done, so yeah. Sorry. It won’t happen again.”

It’s a shitty apology, probably. Tony knows he fucked up, despite everything, that he doesn’t just get to drop off the face of the earth when it comes to someone who’s seen him through the worst times of his life, but he’s never been good at gauging these things, much less controlling them.

So he just sits. Waits. Hopes it goes over well enough to where he gets to eat his pancakes with her.

Pepper blinks, and the glacier shifts, leaves ground worn smooth in its wake. “It better not,” she says and manages to make four syllables into a threat before she sighs, smooths her hands across the table like she always does when she’s nervous. “I missed you, you know. You’re important to me.”

(That warms him, too.)

Tony’s smile straightens out a little, then, and though it’s awkward hitting their stride again with more blank space between them than there’s been in the better part of a decade, it’s nice.

//

They stay at the diner until close, and even though it’s one in the morning by the time Tony starts driving back to the Tower, he makes a detour towards the coffee shop and calls a suit—just to see if Spidey’s around.

It was his advice, after all, that got his head out of his ass, and Tony parks on the street that’s as quiet as the city ever gets before flying up to the roof. Unsurprisingly, the costumed shape he’s accustomed to seeing isn’t there, but as he walks to the edge of the roof with the intent to leave, FRIDAY echoes through the suit. “Boss, there’s a heat signature in the alley to the left.”

Tony raises a brow. “Are we talking a kitten or a person-sized signature, girl?”

“It seems to have the same proportions as Spider-Man.”

In a second, Tony’s heart plummets into his feet, and in the next, he’s all but *leaping* off the edge of the building, landing in the alley with an uncharacteristically loud *thunk* as he looks for the kid.

(Because everything was going too well, because *of course* it would be the kid, because Tony ruins everything he touches.)

Tony wants to be wrong. For possibly the first time in his life, he wants his state-of-the-art, infallible technology to disappoint him, to be so incredibly off the mark he’ll be laughing about this for days.

But Tony spins with the night vision in his suit, and against the wall of the coffee shop, there’s what looks like a bundle of dirty rags, except—

“Spider-Man?” The fabric shifts, and Tony can pick out his limbs now as he races closer, frantic. “Spidey, pal, you’re scaring me. What’s—I thought your suit was bluer than this?”

He's leaning over him now, meeting his eyes that are open but unfocused by the look of the white in his goggles, and he can't make sense of it, the way the blue of his arms and legs is a different shade where they're cradled to his chest.

Not until he puts a hand on his arm and the metal of the armor comes away crimson and wet.

"Fuck."

He's on his knees in an instant, a move that has a surprising amount of weight to it in the suit, moving the kid's limbs to the side to find a bullet hole in his suit and blood flowing freely from the wound, viscous and dark and fucking *everywhere*.

He doesn't know what the kid's gotten himself into, exactly, but he's not responding, his head lolling as Tony handles him to expose bruised skin where his mask rides up on his neck. If he were anyone else, he'd panic at the sight Spider-Man makes, but Tony has rushed more than one person to medical in his time.

(But this isn't *anyone*—this is the kid.)

Tony swallows, stamping down his terror, and gathers him into his arms, but as he does—

"Ben?"

Tony has no idea what to do with that. "Not quite, bud," he tries anyway, nestling Spider-Man's head in the crook of the armor's arm and chest. His repulsors flare as they rise into the night, and vaguely, Tony realizes he left the car behind, but it doesn't matter. *Nothing* matters except getting the kid the help he needs. "FRIDAY, get a med team prepped and waiting at the Tower," he mutters.

"On it," she confirms, and Spider-Man's curling into Tony's chest any way he can, the stains on his suit spreading farther before Tony's eyes.

"Kid—"

"Ben, it hurts."

If Tony wasn't holding him, he'd flinch back.

Spider-Man's never seemed like he has his shit together, exactly, what with his threadbare sweatsuit and lack of funds, but he's never struck Tony like this—fragile, *breakable*. No matter what life threw at him behind the scenes, Tony assumed that he could pull through, and now he's kicking himself for being so utterly *stupid*.

(If one fight could take *Tony* out of commission, why did he think Spider-Man would be different?)

"I know, bud," he breathes.

He isn't Ben, whoever that is, and while it seems wrong to pretend to be someone he's not—someone who's important to Spider-Man, too, if he's calling deliriously for him—he can't *not* reassure him, no matter how that lends to the kid's imagination.

"I'm sorry," Spidey whispers, then, and when Tony forces himself to look down, he finds tears seeping through the fabric of the kid's mask. "I didn't—" He breaks off, and his voice is quieter when it comes again. "I didn't mean for you to die," the kid whispers.

And if Tony didn't already know he hadn't been paying him enough attention, he does now.

"It's not your fault," Tony murmurs before he can stop himself, before he does any thinking beyond the intrinsic knowledge that Spider-Man couldn't do what he's blaming himself for.

It takes a second, but the cry comes again: "*Ben.*"

The name sounds smaller the third time, and Tony wishes he could fly faster.

//

At the Tower, Tony places the kid on a stretcher already laid out for him.

He's not speaking at all by then, silent and seeping with scarlet, and Tony watches until the med team wheels him around a corner. Then, he rushes to the nearest trashcan and pukes so hard it leaves him gasping for breath and pressing a hand to his chest.

He wants a drink, but he *can't*; he has to be present if anyone has questions, if there are any complications.

Tony *has* to exist in this god-fucking-awful moment, and the last time things called so urgently for that—

(His watch-gauntlet, cars falling on top of him, a hand clawing at the arc reactor—)

Tony sucks in air that grates his throat on the way down, shuts the lid on the smell trying to waft out of the trashcan, and gets a glass of water instead.

This isn't about him or Steve or even the Accords. This is about Spider-Man, and this time, he's going to do it right.

//

Tony finds a chair and sits. Waits. And waits. And *waits*, until—

"Mr. Stark?"

"Is he okay? Is he awake?" Tony asks the surgeon who's come up to his private floor, not bothering with pleasantries, but she shakes her head.

"Not yet," she clips, and Tony can't pinpoint what it is, but something about her perfectly placid demeanor unsettles him. "Mr. Stark, have you seen this—ah—*Spider-Man* without his mask, previously?"

Tony shakes his head. "He's pretty touchy about his secret identity, so I've left it alone. Did you have to—" he trails off, hoping she gets the gist.

"We had to get him an oxygen mask, so yes," she explains, and though Tony disliked how clinical she made her tone before, the halting, deliberate way she speaks next is worse. "Do you know how old Spider-Man is, Mr. Stark?"

Oh, God. Oh no—*no*.

"College-aged. A freshman or sophomore, maybe," he says, but his mouth has gone dry. "Isn't he?"

(He shouldn't have to ask—this shouldn't be a question—not if the world was fair, but it isn't, never has been—)

“By the estimate of everyone who's seen him, he can't be out of high school yet.”

Tony's lips part to speak, but he has nothing to say.

(Because nothing could make this *okay*.)

Tony sinks into his chair with a hand over his mouth, and a thousand pieces of Spider-Man's puzzle come together and form a picture that makes him want to *scream*.

//

Only out of respect for his privacy, Tony doesn't tell FRIDAY to run facial recognition. If the kid

—

(The kid. The *kid*, who really is one, who took a bullet to the stomach, who barely made it out of surgery, who still hasn't woken up, half a day after finding him in that alley.)

If *Spider-Man* is uncooperative, then he'll push it, but he wants to give him a chance.

(To rest? To explain? Tony doesn't know.)

“If anyone comes looking for me—” Not that anybody will. “—I'll be in his room,” he tells FRIDAY.

They have a lot to talk about, when he wakes up, after all.

(*Thekidthekidthekidthekidthekidthe—*)

//

The chairs in the kid's room are uncomfortable, but then again, Tony already knew that, from years of sitting with injured teammates. Some hard seats aren't important, anyway.

Tony is far more occupied with Spider-Man.

He doesn't know what he expected him to look like, exactly. It's not like he ever remembers thinking about it, before. As long as Tony has known him, the kid has been a garish, patchworked suit, some freaky goggles, and a voice kinder than most Tony's heard. He thought that had been sufficient, a true look at what makes Spider-Man himself.

But it didn't capture the person under the hero.

It didn't show that Spider-Man is rail-thin, not especially tall but seeming lanky with his scrawny limbs peeking out of his hospital gown, and Tony wonders how extra fat would soften his face, how it'd look not verging on sunken, his cheeks and jaw weathered to scratchy, unnerving angles.

It didn't expose how, aside from his yellowing bruises, Spider-Man is pale, uncomfortably so, and Tony can see the blue of his veins through his eyelids, *can't* see much color in his cheeks or lips.

It didn't let his hair flop into his face like it is right now, light brown, a little shaggy, and Tony would grin at its unruliness if things were different.

It didn't give anyone with a brain the vicious truth that a *child* has been fighting an entire city's

battles.

What Tony previously thought was enough only showed him the alias, not the kid, and Tony takes him in for as long as he can stand before turning his attention to the medical file sitting in his lap.

//

Gunshot wound to the abdomen, severe blood loss, assorted lacerations and contusions across the body, severe malnourishment, moderate dehydration—

//

The worst part, Tony thinks, is the note handwritten at the bottom, the one that makes him consider finding another trash can. Of everything, *that's* what nearly sends him over the edge because how the fuck did the kid do it? How did he look at his shit lot in life and keep helping people? How did he laugh and offer advice and *live* like everything was fine?

(How did *Tony* let him do it? How could he not have seen?)

Tony sits in his stiff chair, hating that it's better than anything Spider-Man has probably had for months, hating himself for not interfering sooner, and maybe most of all, hating the stupid, fucked up world he keeps trying to save for doing this to him.

Tony is three feet from a teenage superhero, and he could turn glass to dust between his teeth at the inference crashing through his head with the ruthless tenacity of tides.

With Spider-Man's extralegal activities in mind, the most likely cause of several symptoms described above is homelessness, the kid's doctor wrote, and Tony wishes more than anything that he'd realized as much sooner.

//

At some point, Tony falls asleep, and he dreams of heater vents and scarfed-down sandwiches.

//

Tony wakes to something crashing, and even that takes a second to rouse him.

However, *then* comes some cursing from a high, slightly panicked voice, and Tony's eyes fly open to find Spider-Man with his feet tangled in his IV.

The words are out of him before he's thought about them, garbled and made rougher by sleep: "What the *hell* are you doing?"

"I—" Tony watches his throat work around a swallow. "Going to the bathroom?"

Tony's first thought is that wow—the kid is a *terrible* liar, and it's a good thing he wears a mask most of the time because the eyes boring into Tony look so guilty it's embarrassing.

The second is that the kid needs to sit down now.

"If it's that bad, I'll call a nurse to help you," Tony bites. "You were shot less than twenty-four hours ago, and you don't need to be moving."

The kid winces. "But I have—"

“We aren’t talking about anything until you get back in bed.”

Tony tries to make his tone as unforgiving as possible, and it must work if the way the kid hangs his head and slinks back to where he came from is any indication. Tony lifts the sheets so he can get in, but even that is strained, their camaraderie built over months dissolved into sideways glances and Spider-Man’s shuffling as he gets comfortable again.

The kid breaks the silence first, hands clenched in the fabric of his covers. “How did you find me?”

Tony lets out a snort, can’t help himself. “I was coming back from dinner with Pepper, and I thought I’d check our spot, see if you were there and, if you were, tell you thank you for helping me with all of that.”

Spider-Man smiles for a second, and even on his gaunt face, it’s a soft expression, the sort that would make Tony smile back if he saw him on the street. However, he sobers quickly. “But I wasn’t on the roof. I—uh—remember getting to the alley, but I was too tired to pull myself up.”

Tony nods. “FRIDAY spotted a heat signature, so I headed down to check it out and—” he peters out.

And he found Spider-Man, beaten and bloody and a few more minutes away from fucking dying of blood loss.

Tony clenches his fist in his lap and tries not to think about how terrified he was that he would land at the Tower with a corpse. “You scared the shit out of me, kid,” he breathes.

“I didn’t mean to,” Spider-Man swears. “I didn’t think it was going to get that bad when I dropped in. I just—these guys were harassing this lady—”

“How old are you?” Tony cuts him off, and almost immediately, Spider-Man clams up, lips pressing together, eyes hardening.

He doesn’t say anything, just tips his chin up and meets Tony’s gaze—a challenge.

Fine. Tony can play that way too.

Mustering his best impression of himself when he’s dealing with a particularly shitty businessman, he drains any emotion from his features, leaving a stony, calculating cast behind. “Kid, I’d like to think that we’re cool, at this point, so I’m giving you a chance. You can tell me this stuff and defend yourself as we go, or I can look it up for myself and get the facts without context. Which do you want it to be?”

Spider-Man’s voice gets louder, rough around the edges—“You can’t—”

“*I can,*” Tony corrects him. “I left you alone before because I thought you were an adult. I can’t ignore the same things, now. That’s how you got shot, in case you forgot.”

“I’m okay,” Spider-Man growls, and logically, Tony knew he had grit to him, that NYC’s streets shred anything that doesn’t have the backbone to withstand them, but it’s strange to see his hackles go up because of him.

(It happens with everyone, eventually, with Tony being like he is. He pretends it’s fine.)

“*Okay?*” Tony spits back, and his mask cracks. “I realize we haven’t gotten that far yet, but if you think it’s *okay* that I found you bleeding out in an alley, we have more problems than I realized.”

“I heal fast!” he shouts, hands flying up to emphasize his point.

“Not fast enough!” Tony replies, and he hates the way his voice sounds—too shrill, affected by it all. This isn’t how he wants it to go. Despite everything, Spider-Man’s been *nice* to have around. He’s been a friend where Tony had very few, and this isn’t how he’s supposed to be repaying that.

Tony closes his eyes and takes a breath to calm down, then looks at Spider-Man again. “Look, I don’t want to argue with you. I know this complicates things, but you’ve helped me out a lot. I want to give you a hand, too, but to do that, I need to know more about you.”

Spider-Man is *glaring* now, dark eyes just as pained as Tony feels. He tells himself not to take it personally, that teenagers aren’t known for responding logically to these sorts of things, but he does have to issue another reprimand when the kid starts eyeing the door.

“And no escaping. You’re injured, and even if you weren’t, I could catch you. Let’s talk, okay? That’s all I’ll ask, right now.”

Spider-Man takes a breath of his own, and Tony doesn’t know how calming it is—he still looks angry, with his stiff limbs and clenched jaw—but he nods, agrees: “*Fine.*”

“Great,” Tony says, flashing a smile that pulls his cheeks too tight. “Let’s start this over, then. How old are you?”

“Almost fifteen.”

Jesus Christ.

Tony coughs into his hand and does his best to smother the fluttery, protective panic trapped in the hollow of his throat. Not now. Not *now*. He’s got the kid to cooperate, and he needs to push that for as long as he can.

“Alright, almost fifteen.” That means *fourteen*—“What’s your name?”

“Spider-Man.”

Tony’s head jerks up, and his mouth twists. “*Kid.*”

“Can you ask something else?”

Tony’s been mostly focused on the questions he scrawled on the back of his file, but now, he sees how hard Spidey’s gripping his sheets, the moisture in his eyes he’s trying to blink away.

Tony does his best not to cringe.

(Fuck, he’s never been good with emotions—he’s going to fuck this up, fuck the kid up—)

“I was starting with the easy stuff,” he tries.

“Just give me the next question,” Spider-Man whispers, and his voice is tight, his hands dry and not especially gentle as one itches his cheek. At the look Tony gives him in response, raised brows and *are you sure?* asked without speaking a word, his mouth screws up with the barely suppressed anger thrumming through every line of his body. “We’re doing this, aren’t we? You won’t leave me alone, even though none of this is your fucking problem, so go for it. What do I have to lose, right?”

And the hysterical little giggle that follows the rush of words—crescendoed from a whisper to a

barely-held-together hiss—drills a hole right into Tony’s heart.

“Alright, then,” he begins, against his better judgement, because the kid’s going to blow if he doesn’t. “Why are you homeless?” he asks, and the color drains out of Spider-Man’s face.

“I’m not,” he insists, too fast.

“You are.”

He’s sputtering, shaking his head and looking around the room as if in search of an answer. “No!” he shouts. “I’m just—just—”

But Tony is done indulging him.

“You *are*. There’s a reason I always find you by the heater vent of our coffee shop. There’s *also* a reason your stomach is always growling.” His words hold too much venom, he can tell, but he can’t make them stop, seething through his teeth that are helpless to contain them. “There’s a reason your suit is always dirty, and there’s a reason Delmar asked after you. I let you lie to me and almost saw you die because of it, so *cut it out*.”

The kid hunches into himself, mouth opening and closing but no words coming out, and Tony, breathing hard, softens, at last.

“Just tell me what’s wrong so I can *help you*, kid. Don’t you have a family? You’re too young for this, to be on your own.”

Tony looks at Spider-Man, willing him to say something, to give him an inkling of how the hell he ended up here, but all that comes, at last, is flat deflection.

“It doesn’t matter,” the kid mutters, so low Tony has to strain to hear it.

“It doesn’t matter?” Tony repeats, incredulous. “Kid—”

“Shut up—shut *up*.” Spider-Man’s chin juts up to meet Tony head-on, eyes dark and furious and brimming with tears. “*Don’t*,” he hisses. “You don’t know me—you *don’t*. Just because we talk sometimes doesn’t give you the right to tell me what to do because you *happened* to catch me after a bad fight.”

Bad fight doesn’t even begin to cover it. The kid barely had a *pulse*, but Spider-Man doesn’t care, doesn’t stop talking, words spewing from his mouth in a vicious, gnarled tumble, the verbal equivalent of a stray dog snapping at someone trying to bring it to the shelter. “You can’t make me go back.”

“I never *said*—”

“But you were going to!” He jabs a finger forward in a motion Tony didn’t know could be jagged but is. “You were going to, but you can’t, and if you try, I’ll run, and you won’t know anything about me at all, which is the way it was supposed to be, and then you ruined it.”

A spark of anger licks up Tony’s jugular, settling at the back of his tongue. He’s used to having no good deed go unpunished, but it fucking *stings*, coming from the kid. “I saved your life,” he growls, fists clenching. “You would’ve bled out in that alley, and nobody would’ve known. You want that, *Spider-Man*?” He should’ve known not getting a name was a red flag, but Tony was idiotic enough to think he could do better with him.

(He sees a shield raised above his head, remembers the hot-and-cold pins and needles settling over his skin when he realized he was standing next to a man who never actually cared in that base.)

Stupid, he thinks, but for all his fury, Spider-Man lashes back, the tears now spilling down his face contorted with all the rage only a teenager can feel and somehow so much more.

“Maybe I do!” he screams, and it’s only after it’s said and both of them realize it that his shoulders slacken, lips wobbling as his face crumples. “Maybe I deserve it,” he whispers, and the fire goes out of Tony in one rush, leaving him hollow and brittle.

“Kid,” he breathes, and when he nudges up to the bed to do *something*, though he’s unsure he knows what, he receives an armful of too-skinny limbs that shake as he begins to sob.

And Tony, shattered and haphazardly put back together with no one around to see the job done well, does the only thing he can think of.

He holds on and lets him.

//

A nurse comes in, eventually. She checks the kid’s vitals, ups his dose of medicine and has the decency not to ask about the tearstains on his face, and when she leaves, Spider-Man speaks, his voice thin, his eyelashes wet, his fingers finally loosened from their death grip on the sheets.

“Before I get into it, you have to know that this didn’t happen to me because of any bad family stuff, okay? Well, it *did*, but it’s not their fault. My—my family’s good,” he insists, and though his face is collapsing like the precursor to a sob, no more tears fall.

Tony nods, pretending this is normal, and the kid closes his eyes for a second before continuing.

“My parents died when I was super young—plane crash, don’t really remember them, yadda yadda yah. You get it, I guess, so no pity, okay? Okay,” he sniffs, moving past any objection Tony might have before it can form. “My aunt and uncle are my guardians. Or were, anyway.”

“About six months ago, I went on a field trip with my school to Oscorp, and in the labs, they had these spiders they’d experimented on. I don’t know how one of them got loose, but I went home with a spider bite and, well—” He gestures down at himself, and Tony can’t help but snort.

“Radioactive spider bite? Can’t say I’ve heard that one before.”

“What can I say?” the kid says, looking to the ceiling with a tired laugh. “I live to impress. So yeah, the bite, and at some point, I realized I could do *something* with my powers. Make a difference. I started sneaking out, and my aunt, I don’t think she noticed. She’s a nurse, and she works a lot of night shifts, but my uncle’s usually home after work, and he did. One night he confronted me about it, and I don’t know, I just—just couldn’t take it? I don’t *know*. It was so *stupid*, but instead of talking to him, I ran. I had my suit in a backpack, and I took that with me. I didn’t—”

His voice cracks. Instead of acting embarrassed though, he turns his head into his pillow for a moment and does that same tearless shudder, and Tony knows it’s going to be bad.

“I didn’t know he would *follow* me,” he whispers, so strained the words must be scraping his mouth raw coming out. “I ran down this alley that I’ve been to before because I was planning on being Spider-Man, not—not *me*. And as Spider-Man, you know, a lot of average criminals won’t mess with me on purpose. They’re looking for a quick job, not a fight with someone with powers,

but you—*fuck*.” He sniffs again, swiping at his eyes. “You can see why I look like an easy target without the costume.”

And Tony hates it, but he *can*. The kid, whatever his real name is, is deceptively slight. He’s well-muscled, true, but a long shirt and pants could hide that easily, and Tony cringes.

“You two got attacked?” he guesses, verbalizing it so the kid doesn’t have to, and Spider-Man offers a wobbly nod.

“Yeah,” he manages. “Yeah, we did, and because he didn’t *know*, my uncle ended up taking a bullet for me.”

(“*Mugging gone wrong. Happens, you know? I was there, but I couldn’t save him.*”)

“Shit, kid—”

“He died, and I didn’t do anything to stop it.”

Tony can’t *stand* his tone, every word dropping from his lips with the weight of a rock, his eyes distant and voice tremulously detached, but interrupting him now would be rude, at best.

(Cruel, at worst.)

“*I froze*, and by the time I knelt to see him, he was too far gone. I held his hand, tried to be there for him, and he bled out on the concrete. He was the best uncle I could’ve had, and he had to die in some dirty *alley*, Mr. Stark.” The words verge on a snarl at the injustice of it all as he nears the end of his explanation, and Tony can’t decide if that’s an improvement from moments ago. Then, however, Spider-Man blows out a sigh. “And I panicked—‘cause I killed him—and I ran.”

There is some *seriously* flawed logic there, not to mention the confirmation of Tony’s suspicions that he’s a runaway. He tries to explain why he’s wrong—and he is, undoubtedly, which the kid could see if he wasn’t so clearly guilt-ridden about all of it.

“You didn’t—”

“If he hadn’t come after me, he’d still be alive.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

“*I killed him*, Mr. Stark. And I figured if I had fucked up that bad, well—I don’t even like me, after that. Why would my aunt forgive me?”

Spider-Man looks at Tony, and past the red lingering in his eyes, the trembling of his lips, Tony sees insecurity cracked across his face like kintsugi, and below that, loneliness.

(What would it be like to be fourteen and out on the streets, completely and utterly on your own? No one to talk to, no place warm to go home to?)

“Because she loves you,” Tony says, and the kid *flinches* away, shaking his head, but Tony isn’t interested in hearing him explain more about why he deserves to huddle against heater vents, to hope for odd jobs to get by. “She should, if what you’re saying is true. She’s your *parent*, bud. Most of them—the good ones, like you say she is—don’t give up on their children. She’s probably worried out of her mind about you.”

Statistics flit through Tony’s head—how unlikely it is for missing people to turn up after months of

being gone, NYC's human trafficking numbers, the amount of missing person reports the NYPD deals with—but he doesn't say any of what he comes up with. That's not what the kid needs right now. Instead, he strikes where Spider-Man is weak.

"If the roles were reversed, if your uncle had followed your aunt, would you hold it against her?"

Spider-Man's eyes are fucking *enormous*—gaping and chocolate brown and as earnest as Tony has always known—where their gazes collide, and Tony knows he has him. "That's different," he whispers, and Tony presses harder.

"How? Why? You couldn't have known you two were going to get attacked. You didn't pull the trigger. You made some mistakes, yeah, but so does everyone, and I'm sorry somebody took advantage of that. You deserve *more*," he finishes, and after debating if it's okay, ends up taking the kid's hand, squeezing.

Spider-Man doesn't say anything for a long second, and Tony is grateful that when his tears come again, they're controlled, slipping silently but purposefully down his cheeks and plinking onto the bed.

"So did he," he manages eventually.

Tony can't argue with that.

//

Just before the kid falls asleep, having cried himself out, he murmurs something that makes Tony stop short: "My name is Peter Parker, by the way."

Huh.

It fits, somehow, though Tony never would've guessed it.

"Nice to meet you, Pete," Tony replies, and the kid offers a small smile before he drifts off.

//

Tony wanders away once the kid is out, tells FRIDAY to alert him when he's up again, and then he starts to research, plan for what to do next.

"FRI, pull up his missing person report."

"Of course, boss."

Tony has some loose ends to tie up, and whether Peter likes it or not, he's getting the help to do the same. The commitment, the *drive* to do as much, is nice, a feeling strong enough to overpower the cloud of *hurtangerexhaustion* that's dogged him since Leipzig.

(Maybe longer than that, actually.)

It's still . . . *rough* to see the picture of Peter on a hologram, his face fuller and eyes brighter than they are now. The information he finds when he looks more, though, is worse because it tells him the name of Peter's uncle, which in turn makes Tony think of the ramblings he heard flying him to the Tower.

(“*Ben, it hurts.*”)

Tony has to take a step back, after that, take a few laps around the lab and press his lips together so he doesn't shout at the fucking *tragedy* of it all, at how much a fourteen-year-old has lost, but he calms himself down.

Eventually.

The bigger surprise is the image of Peter's aunt, May Parker, because he's seen her before, rushing down the streets of Queens with what he now realizes were likely missing posters for Peter.

(“Hey, kid, what's up? You know her or something?”)

Tony takes another lap.

//

“Here's what we're going to do,” Tony begins.

The kid's up, has eaten a little bit and claims he's able to walk, which Tony can't outrule *entirely* because of his healing factor but will definitely be having a nurse confirm.

“Pretend this never happened?” Peter asks.

While Tony is glad to see his sense of humor has returned to him, the comment is not particularly appreciated.

“No,” he rebuffs him. “You're going home, kid.”

“But—”

Tony glares, and he closes his mouth. “I'll give you the night,” he permits. “You're still banged up, and I want to give you time to collect your thoughts, but tomorrow, we're going to Queens. If you want me to take you to your apartment door and leave, I can do that. If you want me to come inside, I can do that too, but you have to explain to her.”

“Everything?” Peter asks, and his voice is uncharacteristically meek. “Even Spider-Man?”

Tony nods and reminds himself as Peter deflates that it's unavoidable. “Even Spider-Man. Your aunt's going to be going through a lot, with you home, and you need more people looking out for you. Speaking of—” Tony clears his throat, hoping he doesn't sound as stupid as he feels, even knowing this is the right thing to do. “—after you get home and get settled, you have an internship with Stark Industries. We can work out the details later, but that way, I can help you out with Spider-Man—keep you safe, give you some upgrades, the works.”

Peter's looking at him like he just asked him to go to the moon and back, and Tony softens a little from his methodical list of demands.

“You can do it. It's not going to be easy, but this'll be better than being on the streets.”

Peter shakes his head, his brow rumpled with concern. “But I'm not *ready*,” he says, and though he hasn't made a request, the words sound like a plea.

Tony shrugs. “No one ever is. I wasn't, for Iron Man—for any of this. You have to learn to roll with the punches. Right now, especially, because I'm not budging on this. You're done living like this, kid,” he swears.

And Peter bites his lip, but he doesn't shrink back, holding himself instead with all the strength

Tony has seen in him over the months they've known each other. "Will you stay?" he asks. "When I tell her what I did?"

(He's strong, but he's also a kid. Tony plans on never forgetting either of those facts again.)

"Anything you want," he swears.

(Spider-Man would do the same for him, after all.)

And the next day, when he sees the world's happiest tears fall down a woman's face, when he sees May Parker wrap her kid in her arms and *refuse* to let him entertain the thought of leaving again, Tony decides that even if the rest of his life is burning, he can live just knowing he set this right.

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap!!

Thank you all so much for the response to the first part of this—it absolutely blew me away. It was so amazing to see the interest people had in this concept, and if you decided to come back for part two, thank you again. <3

End Notes

Hi!! This has been in the works for a little bit, and I'm so excited to be able to share it! Homeless Peter is a trope I really enjoy, and I'm thrilled to offer my take on it.

That being said, I'm pretty sure CW in canon takes place during the spring/summer, so I'm aware that I'm taking some liberties with the timeline here. In my defense: it works better for the plot.

Above all, thank you for reading!! This fic is pre-written, so the next chapter will be up whenever I get it edited/formatted. That'll hopefully be sooner rather than later, but no promises lmao.

If you liked what you read, kudos and comments are always appreciated! Thanks for stopping by, and if you want to yell at me about this fic or anything else that strikes your fancy, I have a Marvel-only blog that can be found [here!](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!